



Building on OPM's Hiring Improvement Memo

October 2019

On September 13, 2019, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) released a memo to Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCOs) entitled [Improving Federal Hiring Through the Use of Effective Assessment Strategies to Advance Mission Outcomes](#). The memo contains many strategies agencies can use to improve how they assess applicant qualifications, thereby improving the quality of their workforces. Some of these steps include using subject matter experts (SMEs) to help screen for minimum qualifications and using more predictive assessments to evaluate applicant qualifications. MSPB has long been a strong advocate for improved assessment. Most recently, our July 2018 perspectives brief, [Improving Federal Hiring Through Better Assessment](#), pointed out that recent hiring reform efforts, while helping to improve the applicant experience, have actually made it more difficult for agencies to evaluate applicant qualifications.

OPM's recommendations will help move agencies in the right direction, but there are additional steps that agencies, OPM, and Congress can take to ensure that agencies are able to hire the talent needed to deliver the Federal Government's critical missions. To reform hiring, the Federal Government needs to go [beyond the prior emphasis on faster and cheaper](#) and concentrate on better by:

1. Getting the right people involved from the beginning;
2. Doing a good job of defining job qualifications;
3. Using valid assessments to identify the applicants most likely to have those qualifications; and
4. Making those assessments easily accessible to all Federal agencies.

Getting the Right People Involved

First and foremost, we laud OPM for identifying a key barrier to good hiring—limiting SME involvement in the process. Too often, agencies rely on Human Resources (HR) staff to define minimum qualifications, write job descriptions, determine appointing authorities, develop assessment tools, develop recruitment strategies, and review applicant qualifications. HR staff play an important role as technical experts in the hiring process, but SMEs know the job to be filled. They have a strong grasp of what skills are needed to do the job, how to define those skills in a way that is more easily assessed, where to find the people who have those skills, and how to determine from an application if candidates have the needed skills. Hiring officials should also be much more involved in the pre-assessment aspects of the process. MSPB's report [Federal Appointing Authorities: Cutting Through the Confusion](#) demonstrated that supervisors are more satisfied with the results of the hiring process when they are involved.

For a long time, the HR community has been responsible for the tasks listed above, so it will take a culture change to ensure that SMEs and hiring officials are more involved in the process. HR will need to learn how to better partner with hiring organizations to exchange information and discuss options available for the hiring process. SMEs and hiring officials will need to understand that their involvement is an important part of their own job

responsibilities and will directly reflect on the quality of their workforce—particularly as jobs become more knowledge based and technical in nature. Therefore, agencies will need to increase partnerships, communication, strategic thinking, and training to achieve this objective. OPM can provide valuable guidance and assistance in how to do that.

Defining Qualifications

MSPB has found that another key barrier to hiring a qualified workforce is how agencies define qualifications, particularly minimum qualifications. In our report [*Identifying Talent through Technology—Automated Hiring Systems in Federal Agencies*](#), we pointed out that using generic qualification standards and specialized experience definitions for competitive hiring reduces the ability to identify the best qualified applicants. At the beginning of the hiring process, applicants are first screened for minimum qualifications that are generally based on OPM's qualification standards and agency position descriptions that may have been written long ago. Too often, these qualifications are general, vague, and difficult to measure, and in some cases, they may not describe the actual duties the new employee will be assigned to perform.

Just look at job announcements on USAJOBS. The minimum qualification requirements are almost always described in terms of time-in-grade—e.g., 1 year of specialized experience equivalent to the next lower grade that equipped the applicant with the particular knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully perform the duties of the job. Then, they may be followed by a list of general duties that “may” qualify as demonstrated experience.

Using general minimum qualification requirements that are not in tune with the specific duties of the job makes it difficult for agencies to measure whether applicants actually have the basic skills needed, and also makes it difficult for applicants to know whether they are truly qualified and should apply. A key complaint hiring officials tend to have is that they are not getting a pool of qualified applicants on their certificates of eligibles. This frustration can lead hiring officials to request more hiring flexibilities or use more restrictive appointing authorities that limit fair and open competition, as discussed in our 2015 report [*The Impact of Recruitment Strategy on Fair and Open Competition for Federal Jobs*](#).

The Federal Government needs to do a better job identifying, describing, and measuring qualifications needed to do a job. That means updating qualification requirements, position descriptions, and job analyses when needed, as well as training HR staff and hiring officials on how to better define a job's essential and desired skills.

Using Valid Assessments

Years ago, most applicants for entry-level Federal positions completed a “civil service examination” that was developed, administered, and scored by the U.S. Civil Service Commission (and later, OPM). This “exam” went through several iterations but was ultimately terminated in 1981 and largely replaced by special hiring authorities and delegations to agencies. Today, agencies are ultimately responsible for developing and administering their own applicant assessment tools for most positions, including entry- and upper-level positions. Unfortunately, as MSPB predicted as early as 1982, some agencies are doing a better job than others at developing and implementing selection procedures.

Higher quality assessments measure how well applicants are likely to perform tasks related to the job. These assessments include work samples, job simulations, and situational judgment tests. Unfortunately, it takes time and expertise to develop those kinds of assessments, particularly when agencies employ people in a large number of occupations and grade levels. Many agencies do not have the resources to commit to that kind of endeavor. As a result, they tend to rely on assessments that are less effective at predicting future performance because they focus on quantity of experience and self-reported evaluations, such as résumés, occupational questionnaires, applicant essays, and education level. We outlined the advantages and disadvantages of these types of assessments in our 2014 report [*Evaluating Job Applicants: The Role of Training and Experience in Hiring*](#).

In addition, recent hiring reform efforts have made it much easier for applicants to apply for jobs, but that does not mean that agencies have more highly qualified applicants to choose from. Agencies told us that because it is so easy to apply, many applicants apply for as many jobs as possible, regardless of whether they are qualified or genuinely interested. Also, with the elimination of essay questions in the early part of the application process, agencies rely more on occupational questionnaires to evaluate applicant qualifications. Agency representatives expressed concerns that applicants rate themselves as experts in every category because they know that is the only way to make it to the next phase of the hiring process, making it difficult to make meaningful distinctions among applicants.

So what can agencies do to improve their assessment programs? MSPB's 2018 perspectives brief identifies 10 factors for agencies to consider when investing in better assessment. Ultimately, though, agencies need to use valid assessments that are based on thorough job analyses, capable of making meaningful distinctions among applicants, and defensible if contested by an applicant. This is easier said than done because developing these tools takes time, resources, and expertise that many agencies do not have. OPM and many contractors can provide this expertise for a fee, but agencies will need to prioritize hiring and devote the necessary resources.

Using multiple hurdles and category rating can also help improve the assessment process. The multiple hurdle approach means using multiple assessments successively to manage the candidate pool and narrow the field of qualified candidates. In general, the order of assessments should be based on the labor involved in the administration of the assessment and the benefit achieved. Methods that are less labor intensive to administer or that can easily handle a large volume of applications (such as online tests) should be used toward the beginning of the process while more resource-intensive assessments (such as structured interviews) should be saved for after the initial pool has been narrowed to a more manageable size. Research has shown that this type of approach increases the hiring manager's ability to narrow the candidate pool and ultimately select better employees. It also has been known to result in a high drop-out rate for applicants who are either not qualified for, or not actually interested in, the job.

Furthermore, MSPB has long been a proponent of using category rating to sort applicants on a certificate of eligibles. Category rating provides hiring officials a larger number of qualified applicants to choose from than the prior "rule of three" method, which limited managers to selecting from among the three highest scoring applicants. However, category rating can achieve the intended advantages only when agencies couple it with good assessment tools that make clear distinctions among large groups of applicants, which has not occurred widely throughout Government.

Making Assessments More Accessible to Agencies

It is, of course, easy to tell agencies to develop better assessments. Unfortunately, many agencies have neither the staff nor the money to do so. MSPB thinks this is where OPM and Congress can help.

OPM's USA Hire program has developed standard assessments for about 120 Federal occupations at grades 3–15 on the General Schedule. The assessments' administration and scoring are automated, and they cover nontechnical skills that are often hard to measure. Furthermore, the program has received very good user ratings from both the agency participants and applicants. So what's the catch? The assessments are offered through OPM's reimbursable services, making them relatively expensive for some agencies.

MSPB has been recommending for many years that Congress appropriate money for OPM to develop and administer assessments that agencies can use at little or no cost. *See, e.g.,* our 2006 report [*Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper*](#), page 51. Given that USA Hire has already developed much of the content, this would be a good time for Congress to provide OPM the budget it needs to make these assessments more accessible to agencies so that they can hire the best workforce available. Several agencies also have told us that providing nonreimbursable assessment support would be beneficial and help the Government achieve greater economies of scale.

Improving applicant assessment is easier said than done. Fortunately, addressing this issue does not require changes to laws or regulations. Meaningful improvement in hiring is within each agency's ability to implement, given the appropriate resources.